

Sermon preached at OCC, 28 December 2025

Merciful God in Christ, you have come among us, and we rejoice; yet still, the world groans in the hope of redemption. Open our hearts to hear you speaking today in and through the readings. By your Spirit, give us grace so that we deny neither the sufferings that remain nor the hope that you give us; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

From Flight to Conquest

In the house where I live, there is a small flower bed on the front lawn. It is an area that receives full sunlight during the day. Last summer, when I moved into this house, there were few flowers, but more grass was growing there. Whenever I watered them, I was careful not to water the grass but the flowers only. The grass was really tough, and it was a trail growth habit, thereby easily expanding its area. At some stage, the lawn mowing man sprayed that area, and they seemed to be eradicated completely. Now it's back, and it's a matter of time before the grass conquers the flower bed entirely. For Herod – the ruler in Galilee in Jesus' time, the rumour of the birth of a future king may be exactly like noticing the growth of the unwanted grass in his flower bed. Whoever challenges his power has to be eliminated before it becomes a real threat, even if it is just a newborn baby. The dynamics between flight and conquest are not new in life. In short, it is a powerful message in that God allowed flight from any danger to conquer the world later.

The Flight to Egypt

Matthew's gospel describes the flight and the conquest well, especially because it is like a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. As a Jew, he writes for Jewish readers. He is interested in fulfilling prophecy. For Matthew, Jesus' birth, Messiahship, death and resurrection are already prophesied in the Old Testament directly or indirectly. Take one example: the holy family's flight to Egypt reminds us of the story of Moses and the liberation of Israel from the tyranny of slavery. There are a few parallels between Moses and Jesus in Matthew.

First, Jesus' flight to Egypt to escape Herod parallels Moses being hidden in the reed to escape Pharaoh, who ordered to kill infant Jewish boys. Pharaoh wanted to lessen Jewish power and the danger of a Jewish takeover.¹ Second, the murder of baby boys by Herod

¹ Exodus 1-2:10

parallels the murder of baby boys by Pharaoh.² Both Moses and Jesus escaped the murderous plans of their respective rulers. Third, Jesus' return to Israel³ parallels Moses' elevation to Pharaoh's palace as an infant⁴ and his return from exile after the death of the king of Egypt.⁵ The parallels show that flight from certain danger was temporary, only to return to conquer. As if the root of the grass is still intact under the deep soil despite its leaves looking dead on the surface, so was the holy family in Egypt before they returned to Galilee. Here a significant difference is that God leads by vulnerability in the New Testament, while God in the Old Testament leads by might.

The Massacre of Infants

In the bible, there is no record of the massacre of infants other than Matthew's account. Yet, the story still conveys Herod's murderous ways of maintaining his power. He kills anyone he thinks to be a rival, including his wife and three sons. So it may not be surprising to see if a massacre of babies happened. Historian Paul L. Maier writes that we don't find any such incident in *The Jewish War* written by Flavius Josephus - the Romano-Jewish historian in the 1st century. But Maier points out, "Josephus wrote for a Greco-Roman audience, which would have little concern for infant deaths. Greeks regularly practised infanticide as a kind of birth control, particularly in Sparta, while the Roman father had the right not to lift his baby off the floor after birth, letting it die" (1998:179).⁶ A lack of historical records doesn't mean that it didn't happen. Yet God does not stop the massacre. Herod seems to achieve a total eradication of weed grass in his flower bed. But the grass root would not die away.

The Return from Egypt

After hearing the death of Herod the great, the holy family returned from Egypt and settled in a town called Nazareth in the district of Galilee. Luke reports that Joseph was from the town of Nazareth.⁷ The holy family returned to Joseph's hometown in the end. The town was small and insignificant that didn't have much to offer to the tyranny of Archelaus – the son of Herod.

² Exodus 1:15-22

³ Matthew 2:19-23

⁴ Exodus 2:1-10

⁵ Exodus 3-4

⁶ <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/new-testament-era/2411-the-slaughter-of-the-innocents-historical-fact-or-legendary-fiction>

⁷ Luke 2:4

The reading in Hebrew also shows the flight and the conquest analogy: the child who lies in the manger is the object of adoration and wonder because he comes from God. But he is subject to suffering and death because he also comes from humankind. According to the writer of Hebrews, Jesus calls us brothers and sisters, and we share the same Father – God, who sustains all forms of life. In v18, it reads, “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” Jesus’ suffering provides deliverance from death and a model of hope and endurance to Christians who likewise experience suffering and temptation.

Are we experiencing flight or conquest? If we experience the former, where are we fleeing from? We Christians live by God's word – the story of God by which we were transformed totally as if John Newton was more than 300 years ago. Flight or conquest, as long as we are living in, with, and by the story of Jesus, we will conquer as Jesus promised in John 16:33: “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world, you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” The grass may be a great hassle for the temporary owner of the flower bed. But as we all know, turf grass sustains the soil healthy so that other life can flourish too. We Christians are like the strong turf that sustains the world, which continually erodes and cannot sustain life. Flight is temporary, but conquest forever. Amen.